

Jose Saramago's Political Take on Biblical Texts: A Critical Reading

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Abstract:

In two of his novels where the Old Testament and the New Testament serve as source texts, Jose Saramago addresses the questions of representation by engaging with the possibilities of reading them politically. In this paper I look at the politics of reading through which Saramago develops his narratives in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and *Cain*.

Keywords:

Jose Saramago, New Testament, Old Testament, Jesus Christ, Cain, Representation

Jose Saramago's final novel *Cain* is one of the most fascinating fictional texts to come out in the early years of the twenty-first century. Saramago had already dealt with the subject of the New Testament in his path-breaking *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, which drew attention to his daring as a novelist, and the branding of his writing as blasphemous was seen as inevitable. There has, however, been no question about the excellence of craftsmanship with regard to Saramago's rendering of the life of Jesus in the novel. Harold Bloom considers *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* to be a creative feat of the first order. Commenting on the excellence of Saramago's work, Bloom writes: "it is an awesome work, imaginatively superior to any other life of Jesus, including the four canonical gospels." (Bloom 2002: 155) Such an exalted view may not be endorsed by different contemporary readers of the novel, but that it is one of the major fictional works of modern literature is agreed upon by many. In *Cain* he takes up the Old Testament where the character range is not only much wider, but also not governed by a central principle as the one of the New Testament. As a novel, *Cain* has for its source material a narrative of greater variety and it spans a much larger time frame than the lifetime of a single individual. Saramago does not suggest any pretensions of a comprehensive rendering in his account; he, in fact, deliberately employs a selectively worked-out structure where Cain's movement across time zones and different locations is facilitated well. The characterization of Cain serves Saramago as both an individual figure and as a vehicular agency—he moves with ease and is present in spaces and at times which cannot be accounted for within the frame of a recognized human lifetime. Cain is shown to be a witness to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the Great Flood, the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah—each of these events located at considerable distance from each other and not traversable for a single individual.

I aim to consider the political dimensions through which Saramago engages with the Old and the New Testaments in terms of craftsmanship, the narrative orientation, the nature of characterization, and the use of the rationalist's lens to look at a subject that is conventionally read from the

perspective of faith. Such an engagement makes it possible for Saramago to introduce the markers of play, the use of irony and satire—through which he undercuts some of the positions of the Old Testament narrative. What Saramago does is not confined to his reading of the Old Testament text from a critically engaged point of view, it also draws on the gaps and silences in the source material to project interventions which highlight the condition of play in the nature of *narrative* itself. There is also the question of the politics of representation which is one of the significant themes in *Cain*. How and to what purpose something is presented in a particular way cannot be taken as a *given*—this is what Saramago appears to contend, whereby questions of authority and identity come to occupy place of importance in the novel. Just as Cain is one of the major characters in the novel, there is the crucial subject of God's presence and authority—and by engaging with the God-Cain relation Saramago draws attention to the open-ended nature that can govern such important questions. Saramago had dealt with the question of God's authority and vision in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, where many of the issues remained open even as they were articulated.

In *Cain* there is the play of narrative, which I consider to be the cornerstone of his representation in the novel. This play, which is more than the exercise of the 'ludic', extends beyond the arrangement of the episodes of the plot incorporates issues of characterization and thematic orientation. Many of the settled situations of the Old Testament are re-examined and placed in contexts which show Saramago's reading through an insistently critical paradigm. In doing so, Saramago engages with the nature of narrative, and also with the elasticity of the novel form which facilitates his marking of the Old Testament episodes in a different light. One of the ways in which this is done is through the mode of the character of Cain, who doubles up as a connecting vehicle whereby his presence makes him a witness to Biblical history, apart from his being an individual situated in a specific space or time. Such a process enables Saramago to take a long view of the wide range of events that make up the Old Testament. Cain's situation as a connecting vehicle also provides Saramago the scope to engage with the ironic dimensions of the various episodes in which he is placed or made a witness to. As can be seen from the reading of the situation of Job, Cain's placement in the novel is not always one of physical presence—it is one which involves the structuring of ideology and discourse. Saramago looks at the different contentious positions pertaining to the episodes of the Old Testament, of which the Abraham-Isaac one is a representative example.

By placing Cain as a man who is in the process of acquiring knowledge, Saramago uses his ironic markers to ask questions of the logic that sustains the Biblical world.

I'm dreaming, said cain when he opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep while he rode and had suddenly woken up. He was in the middle of a very different landscape, with earth as parched as in the land of nod, although the ground was sandy rather than covered in thistles, and with only a few scrawny trees for vegetation. Another present, he said. It seemed to him that this must be an older present than the previous one, the one in which he had saved the life of the boy called isaac, and this indicated that he

could go forwards as well as backwards in time, although not at his own bidding, for, to be frank, he felt like someone who, more or less, but only more or less, knows where he is, but not where he is heading. Just to give an example of the difficulties Cain faces in orienting himself, this place looks to be a present that happened a long time ago, as if the world were in the last phase of being built and everything still had a rather temporary feel about it. For example, in the distance, on the far horizon, he can make out a very tall tower, like a truncated cone, that is, a conical form, the top of which had been sliced off or not yet put in place. It was a long way away, but it seemed to Cain, who had excellent eyesight, that there were people moving around the building. (Cain 68-69)

The sense of dislocation that Cain experiences is shown to be an eye-opener for him. Cain takes time to come to terms with the multiple planes of reality that he traverses. His experience of seeing the Tower of Babel is part of this learning process: "For example, in the distance, on the far horizon, he can make out a very tall tower, like a truncated cone, that is, a conical form, the top of which had been sliced off or not yet put in place." (Cain 69) What Saramago does here is show the growth of experience in its many-sided dimensions. Not only does the experience of Cain serve as a perspective on the state of things, it also enables Saramago to frame the episodes of the Bible within a more critically engaging frame. This is more apparent in the way God is envisaged in the narrative, especially the way the configuration is done in the context of the human view. Harold Bloom has commented on the way Saramago has configured God in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, drawing attention to the placement which is part of the design that he uses to approach the Testament texts.

Saramago's God, as I have said, neither loves the world nor does he expect it to love him in return. He wants power, as widely extended as possible. (Bloom 162)

In placing God as an arbiter whose response is part of a wider apparatus of a power structure, Saramago does not draw a distinction between faith and its opposition, but his is a process through which he looks at the faultlines embedded in the Testament narratives which serves as the source texts of his novels. Harold Bloom's reading of this configuration of the God in the New Testament bears consistency with the representation of God in *Cain* as well.

"Saramago's God can be both wily and bland, and he has a capacity for savage humor. No one is going to love this god, but then he doesn't ask or expect love. Worship and obedience are his requirements, and sacred violence is his endless resource." (Bloom 155)

Saramago places Cain in positions where his contestations of the divine purpose acquire significance for the manner in which he does so. In the examination of the Abraham or the Job episodes, Cain's interventions bring into play the faultlines that form part of the overarching Old Testament narrative. The engagement with the logic of sense thereby opens up an altogether different

orientation through which the storyline of the Old Testament is taken up as a source text. It is evident that Saramago does not propose Cain's reading of the situations or his placement in them to be an alternative to what is settled in the text of faith. What he does, and this is done through the agency of Cain as a witness and through his orientation as a presence across the recognized planes of time and space, is to foreground the structures that are embedded with faultlines in the received narrative. As an exercise in reading the textual dimensions of the Old Testament, there is an insistence on the text's amenability to forms of reading that do not constitute the settled discourses on it.

In placing Cain in the mix of things, Saramago provides a critical perspective regarding the access of Cain to times where his presence is made use of as a questioning voice. Rather than question the event as such, Cain brings into it the viewpoint of the rationalist, a seemingly modern take on the state of things which draw the episode beyond the purview of faith. As a critical exercise, such an engagement is also a creative one in that it examines the textual dimensions of the Old Testament narrative in a way that operates with its own selective paradigm. Saramago's achievement in the novel is sustained by his acknowledgement of the potential that the source text has insofar as it can be read in a variety of ways, of which his orientation is one. Even as Saramago goes against the grain in looking at the source text as a repository to be delved into for purposes of a creative undertaking, the narrative orientation that facilitates such an enterprise marks the space of contemporary fiction in an altogether new frame.

Works Cited:

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